

Winds smash Piscataway home, flip two trucks

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A Piscataway man frantically searched through the rubble of his wrecked home for his 15-month-old daughter in the immediate aftermath of yesterday afternoon's tornado, finding her only by "following her crying."

Meanwhile, high above the Arthur Kill on the Goethals Bridge, heavy winds flipped two tractor trailers, killing the driver and injuring a passenger in one, and forcing police to shut the bridge for four hours.

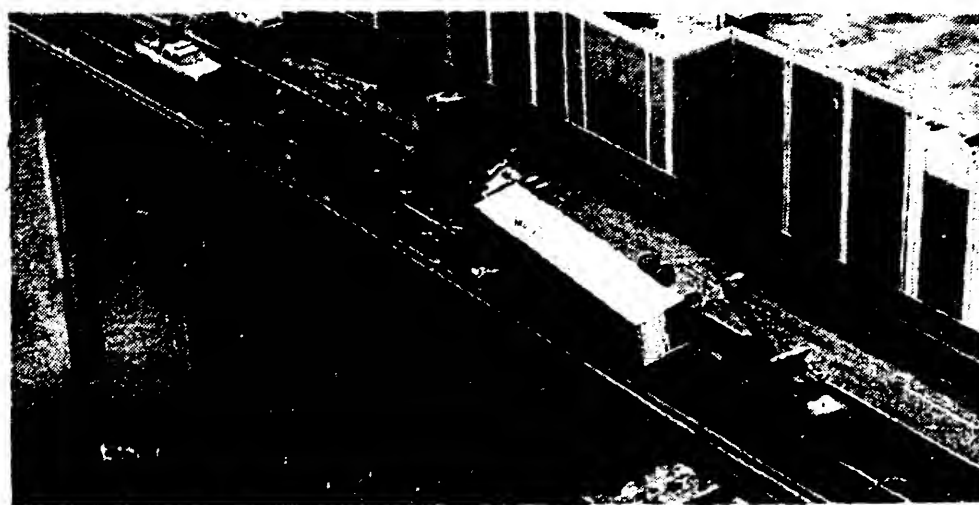
When a tornado ripped into the Yorktown Square development in Piscataway at 12:04 p.m., Yves Caseau, 26, was in his second-floor study working at a computer while his wife attended classes at Princeton University.

Their daughter, Laure-Helene, was sleeping in an adjacent room.

Suddenly, fierce winds began roaring through the street, Caseau said, and he looked out a window to see what was happening.

"I had heard on the radio that there would be wind and rain, but I didn't expect anything like this," he said.

"It's difficult to describe, because it all happened so fast and all that was on my mind was getting to my daughter," he said. "It was like a lot of wind concentrated in a small area. The collapse felt like it was an earthquake."



A trailer overturned by winds is removed from the New Jersey side of the Goethals Bridge

"The floor was shaking and moving under my feet, the lights went out, then I fell down. I started looking around, very upset," Caseau said.

Louis Requena of Matawan, a boom operator, and his helper, David Lynch, also of Matawan, were on one of the devices, handing pieces of plasterboard through a second-story window of a house under construction in a

neighboring development when the wind blew 160-pound packages of plasterboard off their truck.

Then, they watched the Caseau house come apart.

"I saw pieces of the house. Siding, studs, plywood flew up and started swirling around," Requena said. As the twister blew through, Requena said, he saw building materials from the con-

struction site "in the shape of a funnel, 50 or 60 feet high."

Back inside the house, Caseau pushed aside piles of rubble as he made his way to his daughter's room. Looking into her wrecked room, he could not see her crib for the strewn pieces of lumber and other debris.

"I thought my daughter must have been hurt somewhere. The roof had col-

lapsed in the baby's room. Then I started hearing her crying and I felt better."

"I followed the crying," he added, finding the infant amidst piles of wood. "I think the wooden bed she was in helped protect her," he said.

Caseau said he picked up the crying child and rushed to a neighbor's house.

"It was raining and cold," he said.

Yves Caseau holds his daughter, Laure-Helene, as he talks to reporters after being released from the Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital

"All I wanted was to get the baby warm."

Caseau and his daughter were taken by members of the North Stelton Ambulance Squad to Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick, where they were treated and released.

"I'm very happy to be alive," Caseau said. "The baby is just wonderful. She doesn't even have a scratch."

Police Sgt. John Gubernat said there were some tense minutes before the gas line to the house was turned off. "We were afraid there would be an explosion. The gas was leaking out. You could hear it," he said.

Neighbors and construction workers on the job at the K. Hovnanian Companies' Nob Hill at Piscataway housing development nearby said the sky darkened, the wind blew hard, rumblings and a boom were heard and fire raced along electrical power lines on Morris Avenue as the twister hit.

Alexander Martinez of New Brunswick, who was putting sheet rock on the new houses, said, "I saw the big wind go round. It started the cable on fire. I saw it go up into the sky."

Frank Sullivan, Piscataway deputy emergency management coordinator said he believes between 10 and 15 houses in the neighborhood were damaged.

None of the houses were ordered evacuated, but some residents left their homes voluntarily, at least temporarily. Sullivan called in an architect and a structural engineer, who arrived by about 2:30 p.m., to walk through the damaged houses with the residents to determine if the houses are structurally sound.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, siding, shutters and windows were blown off houses on Morris Avenue and Yorktown Drive. The walls of some of the houses appeared to have buckled outward and one house had a large part of its roof ripped away.

Strips of siding hung on power lines and tufts of yellow batting stuck in trees. A young pine tree, neatly uprooted, lay on its side in one yard.

The Goethals Bridge accidents occurred about 12:30 p.m., police said.

Although police had not determined the cause of the bridge accidents last night, witnesses said they believe a sudden gust of wind lifted each of the trucks and pushed them over.

"It was an act of God," said David Pederson, a Wisconsin truck driver who was traveling over the bridge, looking at the damaged cab of an overturned vehicle.

Port Authority police identified the dead driver as Ricky Tolbert, a 34-year-old man from Pulaski, Tenn. The passenger was described as a 46-year-old man from that state.

They said the passenger was in serious but stable condition at St. Vincent's Medical Center of Richmond, on Staten Island.

Police said the driver of the other truck, identified as Frantz Torchono of Montreal, Canada, was not injured. His truck is owned by Hotanchius Laplante of Montreal, police said.

Jay Gerbers, a truck driver from West Virginia who was on the bridge and traveling to Manhattan, was the first to reach the cab of the Tennessee men.

"I got to the (truck) door and just started hollering and he (the passenger) said he was pinched inside," Gerbers said. Using the citizen's band radio in his truck, Gerbers called for other truckers to bring sheets and assist him in aiding the occupants.

He and Pedersen pulled the passenger from truck, and then Gerbers worked his way toward the body of the driver. He said he lifted the body away from the steering wheel and discovered that the driver had serious head injuries and was not moving. Gerbers said he then left the body in the truck.

Police said the driver was pronounced dead at the scene. An ambulance crew from New Jersey took the body to the Union County Medical Examiner's office in Elizabeth.

Gerbers said the passenger appeared in good spirits after he was freed from the truck.

The accidents occurred about 12:30 p.m. and both trucks that overturned were in the eastbound lanes, heading toward New York. However, the trailer of the Tennessee driver's truck was pushed into the westbound lanes of traffic.

Police directed traffic to the Outerbridge Crossing to the south and the Bayonne Bridge to the north.

The two overturned trucks were removed from the bridge by 3:30 p.m. with the use of heavy-duty tow trucks and a earth-moving machine. The cleanup of the bridge was completed about 4 p.m.

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